

ONE AUTUMN NIGHT.

BY M. E. PENN.

THERE is no pleasanter spot in leafy Warwickshire than Clieveden Vale. The little "Clieve"—scarcely more than a stream, though it calls itself a river—meanders through the valley in a loitering, leisurely fashion, now winding through pastoral meadows, now making a detour to cross the main street of a straggling village, where it is spanned by an ivy-covered bridge; then flowing onwards into the green shady solitude of Clieveden woods.

On the slope of the valley, its Tudor chimneys just visible above the trees, stands the Hall, the residence of Sir Richard Clieveden; and on the opposite hill side, with woods and stream between, is the Vicarage—a handsome modern house, surrounded by smooth lawns and bright parterres. The baronet has two sons. Gilbert, the heir, lives quietly at home, dividing his time pretty equally between sport and study; his younger brother, Reginald, who is in the army, seldom makes his appearance at the Hall. "The Captain only comes when he wants money," say the household; and it must be acknowledged that after one of his duty-visits Sir Richard generally finds his purse lightened. Again and again the old gentleman has vowed that he would "draw a line," and pay no more of Reginald's debts; but the line is not yet drawn, for in spite of his faults the scapegrace younger son is the father's favourite.

There is constant and friendly intercourse between the inmates of the Hall and the Vicarage. The Reverend Edgar Severne, though only "a country parson," is a man of good birth and ample means. He has been twice married. His second wife, the present Mrs. Severne, was an heiress, and her fortune will descend to their daughter, Maud.

It is Maud Severne who, on this September evening, stands at the open French window of the drawing-room, looking out over the lawn, the river, and the woods, towards the chimneys of Clieveden Hall.

The fading glow of the sunset lights her face; a face which, like her character, is faulty enough, if critically examined, but thoroughly lovable and attractive nevertheless, with its bright "April-blue" eyes, equally ready for smiles or tears, its pretty wilful lips, and exquisite complexion.

Maud had been standing for some moments, deep in thought—rather graver thought than usual, to judge from her face—when her mother's voice roused her.

"Maud," said Mrs. Severne, looking up from her writing-table at the other end of the room, "did Reginald Clieveden call this morning while I was out?"

"Yes, mother; at least, he did not come in. I was in the garden, and he practised lawn-tennis with me."

Her mother's brow contracted as she closed and addressed the letter she had just finished.

"If Reginald must devote all his energies to lawn-tennis, I wish that he would practise at home instead of spending all his mornings here. I do not care for him to be constantly in your society, particularly during Gilbert's absence. However, his leave will soon expire, I suppose, and then ——"

"I don't see what Gilbert has to do with it," Maud interrupted, a shade of defiance in her tone.

"Don't you think Gilbert has a right to object to your flirting with his brother when you are engaged to himself?" was the quiet enquiry.

"But, excuse me, mother, I am not engaged to Gilbert," she returned, coming away from the window. "A month ago, just before he started on his Highland tour, he proposed to me, but I would not give him an answer then; I told him I did not know my own mind—and it was true."

"But previously to that you had given him sufficient encouragement to justify his thinking that you meant to accept him eventually. He takes it for granted that you will."

"He takes it for granted—yes, that is just what I complain of," Maud declared. "He knows that you and papa are on his side, and he thinks my consent 'goes without saying.' But I don't care to be disposed of in that summary manner."

"That is a very unjust and unkind remark," was Mrs. Severne's comment. "You know perfectly well that your father and I would never attempt to force your inclinations; if we wish to see you Gilbert's wife, it is because we are sure that he would make you happy. He is a loyal, true-hearted gentleman; a man whose love any woman might be proud to win."

Maud was silent a moment.

"Yes, that is quite true," she said at last. "Gilbert is all that is noble and good—almost too good. If he were a little faulty I think I should like him better. He lives in an atmosphere too rarefied for common mortals to breathe."

Mrs. Severne glanced at her with displeasure.

"I am sorry to hear you sneer at Gilbert."

"Indeed, mother, I am not sneering. I have the greatest respect and affection for him, only—only ——"

"Only he has not Reginald's handsome face and flattering tongue," her mother concluded. "Ah, Maud, take care that you do not throw away the substance for the shadow, and find out your mistake when it is too late."

The girl made no reply, but her face clouded with a doubtful, anxious look, as if her mother's warning had given expression to some unacknowledged misgiving in the recesses of her own mind.

She returned to her old place at the window, and after standing there irresolutely a few moments, passed out on to the lawn.

Twilight's "gradual dusky veil" was deepening over woods and fields, and a pale half-moon gleamed faintly in the darkening sky. In the dim light the flowers in the garden-beds looked pale and unreal, like the ghosts of departed blossoms.

Maud crossed the sloping lawn at the side of the house, descended a steep path which led down through the plantation to the river, and paused by a rustic bridge, connecting the Vicarage grounds with those of the Hall. Just above the bridge a little waterfall came dancing down out of the wood to join the river; a few yards lower the stream widened into a miniature lake, whose unruffled surface reflected like a mirror the woods and sky. Close to the margin of the pool stood a picturesque rustic pavilion, called the *Châlet*, built from a design by Gilbert Clieveden, who spent much of his time there in the summer. The upper room, which overhung the water, and was supported on piles, was his study; the space beneath was used as a boat-house. The baronet's eldest son was not only a clever amateur artist, he had made his mark in literature, and was a contributor to several high-class Reviews and scientific journals. A thoughtful, studious, scholarly man; as great a contrast as could be imagined to his brother Reginald, with his frank contempt for intellectual pursuits, his shallow mind, and fickle heart.

Maud leaned against the rail of the bridge, looking towards the opposite bank. The shadows had gathered thickly under the trees, but the rising moon cast a long, tremulous line of light across the lake. At this shadowy silent hour the place was mournful in its utter solitude.

Presently from Clieveden woods came the sound of a musical tenor voice, singing, "Come into the garden, Maud," and in a few moments the singer, Reginald Clieveden, emerged from the shadow of the trees, and crossed the bridge to her side.

"She is come—my dove, my dear!" he quoted, as he kissed her hand.

"I should not have come," Maud hastened to assure him, "only I had something particular to say to you."

"Something pleasant, I hope? If not, let it wait. I have just passed a *mauvais quart d'heure* with my father, and I want you to smooth my ruffled feelings, and pour balm on my wounded spirit."

"Oh, Reginald, are you in disgrace again?"

"Even so. And pretty deep in it too. The pater swears he will have nothing more to do with me. He has 'drawn a line,' at last."

"But you know he always says that," Maud reminded him, consolingly.

"He always says it, but this time he appears to mean it," her companion returned, with a significant nod, pulling his moustache.

"You don't mean that he refuses to help you!" she exclaimed.

"Positively—except on one condition, and that"—he paused, still thoughtfully caressing his moustache. "Such an easy way out of the difficulty, if I dared," he muttered.

"What is it?" she enquired, but he made no reply.

"If Sir Richard does not relent, what in the world shall you do?" asked Maud, after a pause.

He shrugged his shoulders. "How do I know? I can't look so far into the infinities. The true philosophy is to take short views of life. Let us change the subject. What was it you had to say to me?"

She hesitated.

"I was going to ask you," she began, "not to come quite so often to the Vicarage—at any rate, for the present; my mother does not approve of it; at least, she thinks Gilbert would not. She says that I am treating him unfairly, and—and I am afraid she is right."

"That depends. If you are engaged to him ——"

"But I am not; at least ——"

"Then I fail to see what right he has to control you, or why you need banish me, to gratify him. It is me you are treating unfairly—cruelly, Maud, knowing what I feel for you."

"If—if I were sure you cared for me ——"

"You must be blind if you doubt it. 'Care for you'—what a feeble little phrase! I love you as I never loved in my life; and you know it."

"You never told me so till this moment," she murmured, plucking a handful of leaves from a bush near, and dropping them one by one into the stream.

His face darkened suddenly. •

"The words have been on my lips a hundred times within the last three weeks, but a scruple kept me silent. Don't ask me what it was; it is connected with an episode in my life that I hate to think of."

He bent his handsome head to hers, looking into her face with that dangerous tender gaze which few women could resist.

"Speak to me," he pleaded; "say one word, or if the word won't come, put your hand in mine. I shall understand."

Flattered, touched, thrilled by his ardent look, carried away by his earnest pleading, the girl silently placed her hand in his.

There was an expression of triumph and relief, touched by a certain vague remorse, on the young man's face, as he lifted the little hand to his lips.

"Now that you are quite sure that I 'care for you' just a little, you won't talk of banishing me, will you?" he said presently. "Tell Mrs. Severne that if anyone is sent to Coventry it must be Gilbert."

"Poor Gilbert!" Maud sighed, penitently. "I wonder what he will think of me when he learns ——"

"Ah yes, I shall be curious to see how he takes it," Reginald

answered, equably, examining a ring on her finger. "He never dreamt of me as a possible rival; I must look out for squalls."

She looked uneasy.

"I hope there will be no quarrel between you," she said, anxiously; "I should never forgive myself, if ——"

"If there is it will be of his making," Reginald interrupted; "but I should think he has enough wisdom to take his defeat quietly. By-the-by, have you heard from him since he left home?"

"Yes; he wrote last week from a place called Glenfalloch, where ——"

"Glenfalloch!" he repeated in a startled tone; "are you sure that was the name?"

"Quite sure. It is in the Western Highlands. Do you know it?"

There was a pause before the answer came. His face had a blank, dismayed look, and the colour had left his lips.

"I—I have heard of it," he said, at length, looking away from her. "Well," he continued, after a moment, making an effort to resume his usual manner, "to return to ourselves. When may I speak to the Vicar?"

"Papa is going to Leamington to-morrow, to take Mr. R——'s duties for a fortnight."

"Then, Maud, I will see him this evening; at once. I want it to be all safely settled before Gilbert appears on the scene. Are you coming in now?"

"Not with you. In a few moments."

"Gilbert at Glenfalloch!" muttered Reginald, as he ascended the path; "it looks like fatality, and if I were superstitious—bah! after all, nothing may come of it; at any rate, I shall not throw up the cards till the game is lost. *Après cela, le déluge!*"

Very grave grew Maud's face when she was alone. Doubts and misgivings crowded into her mind, and would not be dismissed. Her mother's warning haunted her: "Take care that you do not throw away the substance for the shadow."

Had she really done so, and would she live to repent her rashness? It seemed to her that she was beginning to repent it already. She thought of Gilbert as she never had before, tenderly, regretfully, with a remorseful consciousness of his worth; with a tardy appreciation of the value of that faithful heart which she had flung aside so lightly.

She tried to assure herself that he would soon recover from the disappointment, and return to the old brotherly intercourse, but she knew his nature too well to believe that he could so easily forget. She remembered his words, spoken on that very spot, a month ago: "I have loved you all your life, and whether you accept me or not I shall love you still."

Absorbed in her reflections she did not hear an approaching foot-step, or notice the figure of a man advancing along the path which skirted the stream, on the opposite bank. On seeing her he paused,

looked at her doubtfully a moment, then came quickly across the bridge to her side; and Maud, raising her head, saw before her the very person who had been in her thoughts—Gilbert Clieveden.

She drew back with a stifled cry.

"Don't be alarmed. It is I—Gilbert," he said, in his pleasant cordial tones, taking her hand in both his own. "Did I startle you, dear? I am sorry; it was thoughtless of me."

"I thought it was your ghost," she said, with a nervous laugh. "We did not expect you home for another week at least. When did you arrive?"

"I have only just come from the station. I left my traps to be sent on, and walked home by the river-side, that I might see the place where I bid you good-bye a month ago. I little expected to have the happiness of meeting you here. Is it really you?" he added, bending to look at her; "you look as unsubstantial as a water-wraith. Maud, are you not well, or is it the moonlight makes you look so pale?"

"I am quite well," she answered, averting her head. "You will come in, Gilbert, and see papa?"

"Not to-night; I must go home. But first I want to say a few words to you." There was a pause. Maud's heart beat fast with the knowledge of what was coming. He seemed in no hurry to speak. Leaning back against the rail of the bridge, he took off his hat and pushed the hair from his forehead, looking thoughtfully away across the lake. The moonlight rested full upon his face, and Maud, glancing at him furtively, could not help thinking what a noble face it was, with its broad forehead, calm serious eyes, and mouth at once firm and tender. The features were not classical, perhaps, but they were full of character, and his bronzed complexion, dark moustache, and short pointed beard, gave him the look of a portrait by Vandyke.

"What happiness it is to be near you once more," he said at length. "It seems natural to meet you here in the spot where we parted. So many times, Maud, during the last month, I have seen you in dreams, standing there in your white dress, with the woods above you and the river at your feet! So many times I have fancied I heard your voice mingling with the murmur of other streams far away. Waking and sleeping you were always in my thoughts."

"You think of me too much," she faltered.

"Cure me of that bad habit if you can," was his reply, as he took her hand. "Maud, when I parted from you a month ago I carried a sweet hope away with me; will you ——"

She looked up suddenly, showing a pale, agitated face.

"Gilbert—forgive me!" she began.

He looked at her in surprise.

"What have I to forgive you, Maud?"

"For allowing you to hope, only to disappoint you after all."

The colour faded out of his bronzed face ; he caught his breath as if he had received a blow.

" You never intended, then, to accept me —— "

" Yes, yes, I did," she interrupted, " though I wanted to have my liberty a little longer, but since then —— "

" Since then ? " he repeated, still holding her hand, but looking away from her ; " don't fear to tell me. Do you mean that—that you have learnt to care for some one else ? "

Her silence answered for her.

He looked at the dark woods and the moonlit lake ; looked at them, but did not see them ; there was a mist before his eyes.

" Who is it ? " he asked slowly.

Almost inaudibly she whispered the name.

" Reginald."

" *Reginald !* "

His tone was one of such emphatic astonishment that it startled her.

" Reginald ! " he repeated. " Do you mean to say that he has made love to you ? that he —— "

" He has proposed to me, and I have accepted him," she answered, as he paused. He let fall her hand, looking at her in incredulous amazement.

" Maud, what are you saying ? my brother has proposed to you ? Well, but—good heavens ! he—No," he broke off, " I can't believe it. I cannot believe that he is such a scoundrel."

" Gilbert, what a word ! You have no right to apply such a term to Reginald. If he has wronged you, it is —— "

" It is not of my own wrongs I am thinking," her companion interrupted, " though I might complain of his treachery in robbing me of—but let that pass. Do you love him, Maud ? " he asked, looking at her with anxious eyes. The colour rushed to her face ; she could not answer " Yes." In a flash, as it were, her own heart was revealed to her : but the revelation came too late.

He put his own construction on her silence. " I see. It was an unnecessary question. Of course you do. He is the sort of man women do love—to their sorrow." Then, with a look in his eyes such as she had never seen there before, he muttered : " He shall answer to me for this."

Almost at the same moment, Reginald's gay voice floated down from the plantation above.

" Come into the garden, Maud,
For the black bat, night, has flown —— "

Gilbert started and turned, looking up towards the path.

The girl, watching his face, shivered with a sudden dread.

" Don't meet him now," she said, anxiously, " you —— "

" You need not fear that there will be any dispute in your presence," he answered, divining her thought.

"Nor afterwards, when you are alone together?" she urged.

He did not reply; he was looking towards the plantation, listening to the musical voice ringing out in the evening stillness.

"Come into the garden, Maud,
I am here at the gate alone."

"Maud, Maud!" Reginald called, breaking off in his song. "I have good news for you. Are you still there?"

"Yes, I am here, I am coming," she responded, and would have hurried towards him, hoping to prevent the meeting, but her companion's firm fingers closed on her wrist and detained her.

The next moment Reginald's figure emerged from the trees into the strip of moonlight on the bank.

"Good child, to wait for me," he began. "Hallo, who is that? Why, Gilbert! Where have you dropped from? I thought you were in the wilds of the Highlands."

"I have returned, as you see," the other answered in his usually quiet tone, greatly to Maud's relief; though he made no movement to take the hand extended to him.

"You are just in time to offer us—Maud and me—your congratulations," Reginald proceeded, with a smile which had something mocking in its triumph. "We are ——"

"I know. Maud has told me. But I think, with your permission, that I will defer my congratulations for the present, lest they should prove premature."

His brother gave him a quick glance, as if struck by something in his tone; then, with a slight shrug, took out his cigar-case.

"As you like," he said carelessly. "Hope you have enjoyed your tour, and distinguished yourself by some wonderful discovery as to the 'strata' of the Highlands?"

"I have made one very unexpected discovery, but it had nothing to do with geology."

Reginald started, and paused in the act of opening his cigar-case. Gilbert met his look with one full of significance.

"When and where did you make it?" Reginald asked, after a moment, dropping his voice so as to be inaudible to Maud.

"Only two days ago, at a place called Glenfalloch. You know it?"

He shook his head. He was lighting his cigar, and the flickering gleam of the match showed that his face was colourless.

"There is some one there who knows you, at any rate, and who has entrusted me with a letter for you. Shall I give it you now?"

"No, no, not now," he muttered hastily, with a glance at Maud.

"Come to me at the Châlet in three hours' time; we shall be secure from listeners there," Gilbert responded.

Then turning to Maud, who had caught only a word or two here and there of the latter part of the dialogue, he continued: "It is getting late. I will take you home."

Reginald uttered no protest against this invasion of his privileges, but stood moodily staring at the river.

"Good night," she said, putting out her hand to him.

He looked at her absently.

"You are going? oh—good night. God bless you, Maud," he added, with sudden and strange earnestness: and he would have kissed her, but Gilbert hastily, almost roughly interposed.

"Stand back—do not touch her! How dare you!" he said, hoarsely. His hands were clenched, his face white with suppressed passion; a lurid light burnt in his dark eyes.

Maud clung tremblingly to his arm.

"Come away—please!" she entreated; "remember what you promised."

But already he had commanded himself, and drawing her hand through his arm, turned away without another word.

In silence they traversed the plantation. He seemed absorbed in thought, and there was a stern set look on his face which made her timid of addressing him. Just as they emerged into the lawn, Mrs. Severne met them.

"You have stayed too long, Maud. I —— Why, is that Gilbert?" she exclaimed, breaking off.

"Yes, Mrs. Severne; you must scold me for detaining Maud.

"I shall scold her for not bringing you to the house at once," she answered. "Pray come in."

"Excuse me to-night. I have not yet been home. Kind regards to the Vicar; please tell him I will call to-morrow. Good night."

And he was gone.

"I am glad he has returned, but I wish with all my heart that he had never gone away," the Vicar's wife said with a sigh, as they crossed the lawn.

Maud understood the sigh. "I am very sorry you are disappointed, mother," she said tremulously.

"It is on your account we are grieved, Maud, your father and I. We fear you have made an unfortunate choice. However, if your happiness depends upon this marriage—and Reginald has just assured us that it does—there is nothing more to be said."

The girl's heart sank; she made no reply.

II.

AN exquisite autumn night, full of misty sweetness; the sky luminous with stars, the world sleeping in a calm so profound as to be almost melancholy. Not a breath of wind swayed the trees in the plantation, or stirred their shadows on the Vicarage lawn, where the moonlight lay white and cold; only now and then, at long intervals, a thrill, a tremor ran through the leaves, as if a spirit had whispered to them as it passed.

It was nearly midnight. Early hours were the rule at the Vicarage, and all the household had long been sleeping, except Maud, who turned and tossed in her pretty white-curtained bed, too restless even to close her eyes. Never yet in her tranquil life of eighteen years had the girl felt so troubled. It was not only that her heart was full of vain regret and self-reproach, but there was an oppression on her spirits, a dark shadowy foreboding of evil, which she tried in vain to dismiss. She dared hardly acknowledge in what direction her fears pointed, but Gilbert's face, with that white threatening look of wrath upon it, rose before her as if painted on the darkness.

The window was wide open, and just opposite there was a break in the plantation, which gave a pretty glimpse, set like a picture in a frame of dark foliage, of the Châlet and the moonlit lake. She could not see the little waterfall, but she could hear its murmur; a distant dreamy sound which hardly seemed to break the silence. At length, insensibly, it lulled her to sleep.

How long she slept she did not know. She woke with a violent start, and sat up in bed, her heart beating tumultuously. A shot, followed by a cry, ringing out in the night stillness—those were the sounds which had roused her.

Her first thought was that there were poachers in Clieveden woods, but that supposition was quickly followed by another so terrible that it turned her cold.

A glance at the Châlet had shown her that a light was burning in Gilbert's study, and at the same moment there rushed back to her recollection a few words she had overheard in his whispered colloquy with his brother.

"At the Châlet, three hours hence." Were the brothers there now? Had Gilbert — She sprang out of bed, and without asking herself what she intended to do, began to dress herself as quickly as her shaking fingers would let her.

Gliding noiselessly down stairs, she crossed the hall to the garden-door. "Timon," the house dog, was there before her, scratching and whining uneasily. He, too, had heard the shot, though no other inmate of the house seemed to have been roused by it.

She unfastened the bolt and chain and passed out, the dog bounding on before her across the lawn, and into the deep shadow of the plantation. When she reached the bridge she was obliged to pause to recover her breath. The window of the Châlet was open, but the lamp was so placed that she could see nothing of the occupants of the room. All looked peaceful enough, but she did not feel reassured. There was something ominous in the silence.

The entrance of the building was at the side, up a flight of wooden steps. The dog was barking angrily and scratching at the door, which was locked.

"Who is there?" demanded Gilbert's voice.

"It is I—Maud. Let me in."

She heard a smothered exclamation, then there was a pause.

"Wait a moment; I will admit you presently," he said.

A sound of hurried footsteps followed; a noise as of some piece of furniture being moved; then a long silence.

At length the door opened, and Gilbert stood before her, deadly pale; his dress disordered, his breath coming quickly. He looked at her as if she were a ghost, and for a moment neither spoke.

"Why are you here, Maud, at this hour?" he asked, at length. Without replying, she passed by him into the room, followed by the dog, who began sniffing suspiciously about the floor. It was the model of a bachelor's sanctum: panelled walls and a polished floor; plain furniture of unstained oak, a capacious writing-table in the middle; an easel in one corner; over the chimney-piece an array of pipes of all shapes, sizes, and colours; on the opposite wall, near the door, a trophy of arms, fencing-foils, fishing-rods, and hunting-whips, surmounted by a fox's head. To-night all was in disorder, and on the floor at Gilbert's feet lay a gun. Maud took in all these details before she turned to him again.

"Where is Reginald?" she asked, in a voice hardly above a whisper.

"He is not here, Maud, as you see."

"He has been here; there is his glove."

"Yes, he has been with me, but —— Why do you look at me so strangely?" he broke off, taking a step towards her.

She recoiled from him, putting out both hands to keep him away.

"I heard a shot," she panted; "there is a gun at your feet—did you—have you —— Gilbert! what has happened? Where is Reginald?"

For a moment he stood looking at her like one in a dream; then, instead of replying, he walked to the window, and after glancing out at the lake, silently beckoned her to approach.

"Look! who is that?" he said, pointing down.

At the same moment a boat—his own little canoe, the *Maud*—shot out suddenly from the boat-house below into the moonlit pool.

The occupant was Reginald. He did not even glance up at the window, though he must have heard Maud's involuntary exclamation, but with a few strokes of the paddles sent the canoe, swift as a swallow, across the lake, and on up the river towards the Hall.

"Thank heaven!" the girl exclaimed, as she drew back from the window. "Oh, Gilbert," she added, turning to her companion, "can you forgive me for having ——"

He put up his hand to interrupt her. There was a look of pain on his face which deepened every line. "I have no right to resent your suspicion, Maud," he said in a low tone; "it is only by heaven's mercy that I was not the cause of my brother's death to-night. Sit down a moment," he continued; "I promised Reginald that I would tell you all. He was with me when you came, just

now, but not wishing to meet you, left the Châlet by this door. Down, Timon—down, good dog !”

He stooped and showed her a trap-door in the floor, which communicated, by a flight of wooden steps, with the boat-house below.

“But why should he avoid me ?” she questioned, when he returned to her side.

“I am going to tell you, Maud. It is a miserable story. I wish to heaven I could spare you the pain of hearing, and myself the shame of telling it ; but you must know it.”

“Stay,” she interposed ; “is it something you have found out about Reginald ? something you learnt when you were in Scotland ?”

He silently assented.

“Perhaps—perhaps you discovered that he was already engaged ?” she hazarded.

“Worse than that. I discovered that he was already married.”

She sank into a chair, looking up at him incredulously.

“Reginald married !” she gasped ; “impossible ! Oh, Gilbert, there must be some mistake.”

He shook his head. “I saw his wife only two days ago. She is the daughter of the inn-keeper at Glenfalloch, and one of the loveliest women I ever met. Two years ago, when Reginald was salmon fishing in the Highlands, he passed through the place. He had intended to stay three days ; he remained three weeks ; and when he left Jeanie Henderson went with him ——”

“As his wife ?”

“There was no marriage ceremony, and he declares he never regarded her as his wife, but he owns that he acknowledged her as such in the presence of witnesses ; and that, by the law of Scotland, as he must have known, constitutes a legal marriage. He took her abroad, wandered about the continent for a few months, soon wearied of his beautiful but uneducated companion, and finally—deserted her. Not knowing his address (he had been careful to keep from her all knowledge of his real station), she could not trace him, and so returned half heart-broken to her father’s roof.

“I had been staying some days at Glenfalloch Inn before Jeanie knew my name. When she learnt it she asked me, in an agitated tone, if I had a brother or relative named Reginald, and then—well, then I learnt what I have just told you. The next day I left the place, bearing a letter for Reginald from his wife. For that she is really his wife, I ascertained beyond doubt.”

“And yet he would have married me !” Maud exclaimed. “What an escape I have had. I understand now,” she added thoughtfully ; “Sir Richard wished him to propose to me ; that was the ‘condition’ Reginald spoke of.”

“No doubt. Well,” he pursued, “when we met here half an hour ago, we were both in the worst possible mood for such an interview.

I was suffering under a strong sense of personal wrong, and his careless, defiant manner seemed to add insult to injury. I told him briefly what I had learnt, and required his promise that he would immediately acknowledge his wife. He flatly refused to give any such engagement. I set my back against the door, and vowed he should not leave me till he did. In a spirit of angry jesting he took down a gun from the wall, and pointed it at me, with some taunting words which I need not repeat. Forgetting, in my excitement, that it was loaded, I seized it and tried to wrest it from him; in the struggle it went off—to my horror he uttered a cry and staggered backwards, his forehead covered with blood.”

Maud shuddered and put both hands to her eyes.

“Mercifully, the bullet had only grazed his temple, but the thought of what *might* have been turned me cold and sick. In the sudden revulsion of feeling all anger was swept away, not from my heart only, but from his too. I bathed his forehead and gave him some water, and then he silently offered me his hand.

“‘I have acted like a brute and a villain, Gilbert, I know that well enough,’ he said in a changed voice; after a pause, ‘you said you had a letter for me; give it me now,’ he added. He read it through in silence till he came to a sentence near the end. ‘The child—our child?’ he repeated, with a start; ‘good heavens, I did not know’—his face suddenly flushed and softened, and there were tears in his eyes. ‘Poor little Jeanie,’ he muttered, as he folded it again: ‘I must have a heart of stone if I could resist this appeal. I shall go to her at once. I must leave you to break it to the pater, and—and to Maud. Tell her—no,’ he broke off; ‘I dare not say all I feel, and I won’t say less. I will send no message.’ I promised to make the best of the case to everyone, and if my father still refused to help him, I undertook to pay. Well, it does not matter what more passed between us, we were still talking when we heard the dog barking at the door, and directly afterwards your voice. To avoid meeting you he went out by way of the boat-house, and the moment I had closed the trap I admitted you.”

Maud drew a long deep breath, and raised her head. Her mind was occupied by a mixture of feelings, too confused to be intelligible, but chief amongst them was relief. She was free once more. There might yet be a chance of winning back the treasure she had cast aside so carelessly.

Her companion heard the sigh and misinterpreted it. He sat down beside her and took her hand, looking tenderly into her face.

“Maud, my friend and sister, what can I say to you? I dare not even offer you sympathy, it is too like pity, and that, I know, you would resent. But child, you are young; your wounded heart will heal more quickly than you think, and the day will come when another more worthy of your love ——”

She withdrew her hand quickly, and turned away her head. A

look of pain crossed his face. Again he misunderstood the action.

"It was not of myself I was thinking," he said gently. "I shall not trouble you again with my own feelings. All that is past. Lest my presence should keep alive painful memories, I shall go away for a time, till——"

"Why should you go away?" she murmured, without raising her eyes; "let us—let us go back to the old times, when I was what you called me just now, your friend and sister."

He shook his head with a grave smile. "The old times are past and gone, and the old feelings with them. Having once been your lover, I can never again feel for you as a brother."

"But you ——" she began, then stopped abruptly, with a vivid blush. "I must go home," she added, rising.

He extinguished the lamp, and they went out into the cool, fragrant night.

The waterfall was still singing its monotonous song to the sleeping woods. To her ears it seemed to echo like a mournful refrain—"The old times are past and gone—past and gone!"

As she walked silently at her companion's side, her heart was swelling with vain regret. Bitter tears, such as she had never shed before, blinded her eyes. She longed to cry aloud all that filled her heart; but when she tried to speak no words would come.

Midway in the steep plantation path she stumbled over a projecting root, and would have fallen if Gilbert had not supported her. As he raised her he heard a suppressed sob.

He pressed her hand passionately to his breast.

"Maud, Maud, it breaks my heart to see you suffer! What can I do, what can I say to comfort you?"

"Don't leave me," she sobbed, clinging to his arm; "if you want to comfort me, don't go away! Gilbert ——"

Something in the pleading voice, something in the clinging pressure of the little hands on his arm, made his heart leap with a sudden sweet hope, wild though it seemed.

"Maud," he whispered, pausing; "don't tell me to stay unless you can tell me to hope too."

"Stay," she repeated, laying her tearful cheek against his sleeve.

"Child, do not trifle with me," he said, his voice stern with emotion. "I cannot be content with half your heart; I must have all, or none; and if you loved Reginald, how can you ——"

"I did not love him," she interrupted, looking up; "I mistook my own feelings. I was weak and foolish and perverse, and—oh! Gilbert, if you will but forgive me; if you will only take me to your heart again, I ——"

The sentence was never finished. Before she could utter another word she was clasped to that faithful heart, and Gilbert, in lover's fashion, closed her lips.